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HUMANITIES IN A JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL.

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A HUMANITIES COURSE HAS BEEN DEVELOPED FOR ACADEMICALLY ABLE SEVENTH-GRADE STUDENTS IN BRANCIFORTE JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL IN SANTA CRUZ, CALIFORNIA. IN A TWO-PERIOD DAILY TIME BLOCK, STUDENTS LEARN ENGLISH, LITERATURE, AND LATIN, AND INVESTIGATE TOPICS IN ARCHEOLOGY, CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY, LINGUISTICS, PSYCHOLOGY, PHILOSOPHY, GREEK LITERATURE AND CULTURE, HEBREW LITERATURE AND CULTURE, AND FINE ARTS. THEY READ EXTENSIVELY, WRITE PROSE AND POETRY, AND EDIT AND PRODUCE CLASSICAL DRAMAS. UNIFYING THEMES FOR THE COURSE ARE THE HEROES AND HEROINES OF LITERATURE AND THE ETHICAL CONCEPTS OF DIFFERENT CULTURES. THE RESOURCES OF THE COMMUNITY, THE SCHOOL LIBRARY, AND OTHER COURSES IN THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM ARE USED IN DEVELOPING CLASS PROJECTS. AFTER COMPLETING THE PROGRAM. STUDENTS WILL HAVE INVESTIGATED ELEMENTS OF THREE CULTURES BASIC TO THEIR OWN--GREEK, LATIN, AND HEBREW--AND WILL HAVE HAD MANY ENRICHING EXPERIENCES IN LANGUAGES AND CLASSICAL LITERATURE. THIS ARTICLE IS PUBLISHED IN THE "FOREIGN LANGUAGE NEWSLETTER," MARCH 1966. (AM)

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HUMANITIES IN A JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL

By Bonnie M. Knight
Branciforte Junior High School
Santa Cruz

The Furies dangle from a lamp fixture over Peggy's head as she stands in the center of the room, her sketch for the arrangement of a bulletin board display in hand. A dozen classmates are pinning their papier-mâché statues to the wall under the title "Greek Gods and Demigods."

"No!" chorus Mario, Jeff, and Ron, as Lisa attempts to borrow for her Pan a shred of cotton cloud from their looming, six-foot Mt. Olympus. At the teacher's elbow, Ken, clutching an eagle-wigged Pluto, chants, "I need some black paint, I need some black paint."

This is one day in Humanities for academically able seventh-graders at Branciforte Junior High School in Santa Cruz, California. In another moment the clutter will be cleared, and the students will be settling into perfect order to hear a lecture, by a visiting junior-college professor, on the production of *Antigone*.

In a two-period daily block, these twelve-year-olds study literature, English, and Latin. They experiment with archeology, cultural anthropology, linguistics, psychology, philosophy, a bit of Greek, the fine arts, and anything else that catches their fancy or which is needed to carry out a project. They read extensively, write poetry and prose, edit and produce classical drama. Unifying theme for the course is a search for the hero. Who is he? What is his culture? His ethic? How does he relate to a twelve-year-old student living in California today? Heroines are not neglected; the literature is rife with excellent women.

The program grew from a request: Teach English and foreign language — Latin, if you please — to accelerated seventh-graders. It has fed on correlation with a fine social studies program, a library which seems to sprout resource books by magic, a helpful art and drama instructor, and the interests of students and teachers. It will ultimately include concentrated study in three eras: the Greek, the Medieval at the edge of the Renaissance, and the Old Testament Hebrew. The Medieval study begins this year with the reading of an historical novel, probably Reade's *The Cloister and the Hearth*; of literature written in the time; and of other well-researched historical fiction. Simultaneously, in the related social studies program, the historical, political, and social background of the Middle Ages will be explored, with particular emphasis on the early Medieval castle society; later, students will read biographies of Renaissance figures. Concepts to be gained, activities to be employed will be determined by students and teachers as they explore the new materials. First scanning of Hebrew materials, beginning simply with stories of the Old Testament which contain allusions most common to western culture, will occur in late spring.

A design for the use of Greek materials has been developed over a four-year period. One thing has led to another in the choice of subject matter, as well as in techniques by which it is approached. Reading Olivia Coolidge's *The Trojan War*, a simple but scholarly version of the *Iliad*, prompted library research in mythology (to understand more clearly the heroic motivation), in archeology (to establish historicity), and in related literature, such as Hesiod's works (to learn more). Seventh-graders like mythology and action; they are enchanted to discover the intricate system of beliefs of the heroic-age Greeks, and they come to understand the psychology of their heroes very well. Adolescent insight, from the very simple to the fairly complex, comes tumbling out at this point, much of it in relation to the students' own lives.

"The heroes were brave in combat because they believed in the Fates."

"—And if it was their time to die they wanted to go gloriously, so their shades could go to Elysium."

"But what about Hector? I think he was afraid when he fought Achilles."

"Well, that proves they were human, too. People don't always live up to what they believe."

Joan, Ken, and Danny write papers in which they explain how burial rites are influenced by what one believes about life after death; they contrast heroic customs and beliefs with those of today. Jerry and Bobby deal in their writing with very masculine topics: similarities and differences in warfare, weaponry, and military organization in modern and ancient worlds. The group experiments, in discussion, then in writing, by placing in contemporary setting their favorite heroes, complete with beliefs in the gods, in Fates and Furies, in prophecy, and in jealous, boastful protection of their own heroic reputations while on earth.

Curiosity as to what happened after the Trojan War led to the reading of classical Greek plays, such as *Andromache* and *The Trojan Women*, as well as the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*. The discovery that the plays were moving, understandable, and full of characters, mortal and immortal, whom they knew well, excited students to the next suggestion: "May we produce a play?" The survey of Greek drama which followed led, last year, to sheeted, safety-pinned productions of *Alcestis* and *The Frogs*, which were surprisingly well done. Students edited the materials to make them suitable and entertaining to junior-high audiences, and, incidentally, learned a good deal about dramatic structure. Not one child had ever seen a Greek play; much research, therefore, was necessary to solve problems of staging, choral speaking, and the design of costumes and properties. Both plays illustrated clearly to the students the changes in religious attitudes on the part of the later Greeks, in contrast to the earlier, more orthodox beliefs found in Homeric and Hesiodic stories. As an experience in language, alone, the plays were judged by the students to have been of value. Cathy, who sustained the grave, tender role of Alcestis, gasped, "My gosh! I never learned so many big words in my whole life before."

This year's class has selected for production Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and Aristophanes' *Clouds*, a satirical attack on Socrates. Individually, or in pairs, students read the works of Greek dramatists. Using previously learned terms — the standard elements of fiction — in order to systematize their descriptions of what they have read, they present their works to the class for three purposes: to trace the survivors of the Trojan War, to glean any mythology previously unknown, and to consider which plays they wish to produce.

Several other advantages have benefited the project this year. A new elementary school, just opening, contains a miniature Greek theater with perfect acoustics, where they may be invited to perform the plays. The local junior college produced *Antigone* in November. The humanities class was invited to view dress rehearsals. The director visited the class to describe Greek stagecraft, to explain the particular play, and to relate some of the issues in the choice of translations of any play. Students this year, then, are particularly alert to differences in translations and to the need for choosing versions in which the language is clear, forceful, and beautiful. Last year it was discovered that students themselves, as they began their rehearsals, could edit efficiently, altering passages to attain clarity, eliminating passages which are repetitious, offensive to modern taste, or significant only to a classical Athenian.

Other opportunities occur for exploring Greek materials. A school poetry contest

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is an excuse for resorting to simplified Aristotle, not for dogma, but in pragmatic spirit, to discover, first, the nature of poetry, then some criteria for criticism. After a brief foray into the history of the Greeks' concern with being as being (one hesitates to call it easy ontology), in which students grapple with such concepts as matter and form, abstraction, essence and accident, they set out to try to "think as Aristotle did". They try to abstract for themselves the essence of something simple, such as a table, then something far too complex, such as a human being, before moving in on poetry. Working in small groups, reading poems they have found (and which they must like, not just have grabbed for), they try to formulate answers to these questions: What seems to be essential to the being of a poem? What may be accidental to a poem? As they begin to identify simple poetic elements, they begin to write original material. The problem of criticism sends them again, experimentally, to the *Poetics,* and to the discovery of criteria which can be applied in order to judge what they are reading and writing. No uniform aesthetic standards are ever drawn. There is often sharp division within groups and between groups as tentative lists are formed or criticisms offered. It is a beautiful thing to observe the intemperate passion of a twelve-year-old boy who bolts his group because his comrades will not agree with him that rhyme is essential (or is not essential) to good poetry. The class is deliberately left in suspense and in as much conflict as possible over issues of taste and criticism at the end of the unit. Individuals who desire to continue reading and/or writing poetry are encouraged to do so. The remainder of the students hear and criticize these new attempts briefly at the beginning of class for as long as interest is sustained.

One parent always rises from the crowd at the annual Open House to ask, "But why Latin?" The instructor is tempted to laugh and to reply, giddily, "For fun — of course." In many ways Latin gives unity to all other study in the program. The textbook used provides much vocabulary which need not be memorized, and it builds initially upon many cognates, so that students are immediately reading lively material with ease. Problems in inflection are minimized by exploring many possibilities in the use of first declension and first conjugation, before surprising students with the fact that the language is considerably more complex. Very little memorization is needed; emphasis is upon understanding linguistic concepts, working from the known toward the new. The first stories read are simple versions of already familiar myths. They pick up the threads of the Trojan War again in tales from the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*. Later stories are drawn from Roman historical writing and from Greek drama. In this way, students consciously experience the transmission of culture from one society to another, as they have already done within the framework of Greek history. The reading in Latin is strongly related to social studies, which considers historical and political Rome in depth. The text not only emphasizes the Greek influence upon Rome, but traces the movement of Latin culture into western Europe. It is rich in illustration and explanation of materials which relate Roman culture to that of the contemporary world, especially to that of the United States. Eight parents this year are teaching themselves Latin from texts carried home by their children. Queried about the reasons for her study, one mother replied, "Because it's something I always wanted to know." One student, tiny, bright Nicole, insisted on checking out her book to carry with her during a four-week visit to Hawaii.

The curiosity of bright children suggests much of the content of the course. Flexibility is a rigid rule. They stop everything to learn the Greek alphabet, to practice writing in Greek root words common to English, to understand transliteration by trying it. Idiomatic differences in languages interest them, as does Chaucerian spelling, etymology, and every aspect of linguistics. They have discovered the morpheme, variations in sentence patterns from language to language, and some of the differences between languages heard and languages read. The class has organized itself into committees of publishers and editors to produce forty hand-bound copies of *The Anthology of Mythology*, a collection of their original essays which grew out of research. The same material was used orally when they were asked to present to social studies classes a program which could explain the significance of mythology. A half dozen children read the *Aeneid* and related to the others Vergil's story of the connection between the fall of Troy and the founding of Rome. Another group performed the same service with the *Odyssey*. Janet's wise questions about English led her, Lida, and Randi to make a bulletin board display to explain the historical development of their language. They disappeared with the teacher's Jespersen and returned with an accurate, detailed outline, essays, sketches, and word samples of language infusions.

Several factors make it possible to offer to comparatively young students rich fare. The children are intelligent, therefore enthusiastic. Interested parents and teachers provide aid, advice, and books. A creative school librarian has built a fine supply of classical works translated especially for children: e.g. the versions of Robert Graves, Mary Renault, Padraic and Mary Colum, and others (although some students prefer to read adult translations). Above all else, however, the use of projects, which are chosen by the students, establishes definite goals to which all learning, formal and informal, is directed. Research in mythology, for example, was necessary, because students had elected to make papier-mâché sculptures of gods and demi-gods. (The teacher grins. Students "elect" to do so every year. One simply waves a sample sculpture at them and wonders whether they want to make some too.) They listed the immortal beings they deemed necessary to an understanding of heroic culture; each student selected a name from the list. The teacher imposed these conditions: A student might not bend a wire until he had gleaned all the information a good library offered (this included sections in history, culture, art, architecture, archeology, religion, literature — and pictorial sources as well as literary). He must prove that he is ready to create an authentic sculpture by summarizing his research in a brief paper.

Community resources are exploited. Lisa brings her parents to class. They have just returned from Greece, bringing good colored slides and an infectious interest in archeology. An anthropology professor who dug in Greece visits the group; they are entranced to learn that he slept overnight, alone, at Mycenae, "pretending to be Agamemnon", and he is stimulated by their informed enthusiasm. Students keep each other posted as to dates for lectures, plays, films, exhibits; occasionally, events not strictly pertinent sweep the entire schedule aside. More than half the class saw Olivier's *Richard III* in the fall, after having read about the play in Marchette Chute, a volume just discovered. The television "spectacular", *Hamlet*, required a day's lively discussion. In April, for sheer nonsense, they have permission to celebrate the "founding of Rome"; rashly, they expect to do this in one day. A rule of thumb is that any activity to which class time is given must be worthy of the time it requires in terms of learning, as judged informally by students, teachers, and a wise administrator.

Teaching such a class is sheer, schoolteacherly fun. One finds one's self kneeling on the carpet to be eyebrow-to-eyebrow with Derek or Jenny, because they have asked, earnestly, about infinitive complements. Jimmy says, "Now that I'm a Twig, do you think, if I work, I can be a Laurel?" Translated, that means he has voluntarily studied his way to a level

above the regular Latin class, and would like to try for a place among the honored few who are racing through the language at independent, high speeds. Shy Jim reveals himself as a poised comedian, bold in speech, twinkling in eye. Danny, Bobby, and James never forget the least detail of their reading. Grace and Virginia volunteer for any task that needs doing; Jane edits the book skillfully, helped by her staff. Randi names her new litter of hamsters after the Olympian deities. Debbie comes privately to say that she talks to her grandmother about class, because they both like mythology.

At the end of the year, each child will have explored three cultures fundamental to his own, with particular stress on ethical concepts. He will have enjoyed varied experiences in language. He will be familiar with many allusions common to western literature and will be somewhat acquainted with classical literature. To articulate a chief goal is difficult. It is, perhaps, to help the child discover that learning brings a pleasure all its own, and that human rationality, in any age, is exciting.

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